

**Post-Secondary Student Barriers, Belongingness, and Well-Being: Informing Campus  
Mental Health Strategy Through Student Perspectives**

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### **Abstract**

Over the last two decades, there has been a substantial increase in higher education attainment in Canada. Although this is a positive thing, as post-secondary education comes with various benefits, it is important to recognize that the stress of this transitional period has been shown to place young adults at a higher risk for mental disorders, particularly anxiety and depression. Personal, circumstantial, and societal barriers can also negatively impact student experience. Connection and sense of belonging have been identified as essential mitigating factors with student, faculty, and campus support, decreasing challenges and improving overall academic success. The current qualitative study gathered post-pandemic student perspectives through focus group discussions about challenges and institutional supports at Red Deer Polytechnic (RDP). Findings from this project will be used to inform the RDP Mental Health Strategy for the years 2024-2027. Thematic analysis by two independent coders revealed four overarching themes: (1) financial challenges and frustrations, (2) accessing supports, (3) faculty and program; and (4) connection and campus climate. Implications of these findings are discussed along with possible actionable steps for better supporting student success and well-being.

*Keywords:* Barriers, Belongingness, Well-Being, Post-Secondary, Students

## **Post-Secondary Student Barriers, Belongingness, and Well-being: Informing Campus Mental Health Strategy Through Student Perspectives**

A recent survey by the Council of Ministers of Education (2013) revealed over 97% of Canadian parents indicated having hopes for their children to pursue higher education. As of 2002, employment in Canada has grown by 43 per cent for those with post-secondary qualifications, while jobs for people who have a high school diploma or less have declined significantly. Additional benefits of higher educational attainment include higher wages and financial stability, a greater sense of life satisfaction and well-being, job safety and resilience to life stressors, a healthier lifestyle and healthier children, as well as increased social responsibility to their communities (Cassidy, 2015; Frenette, 2014).

Despite these benefits, Canada's 2016 census reports only 54.0% of Canadians aged 25 to 64 had either college or university qualifications, meaning a substantial number of Canadians are still choosing to not attend post-secondary institutions. Personal, circumstantial, and societal barriers are key factors identified in past studies to negatively impact student participation and retention (Chen, 2012; Curtis et al., 2023; Hall, 2016; Mueller, 2008). Moreover, the stress of the transitionary period into post-secondary has been shown to place young adults at a higher risk for mental disorders, particularly anxiety and depression, lowering student well-being (Curtis et al., 2023; Eells, 2017; Hall, 2016; Walburg, 2014). Social connection and a sense of belongingness have been identified as essential mitigating factors specifically through student, faculty, and campus support, decreasing challenges and improving overall academic success (Arslan, 2022; Moeller et al., 2020). The purpose of the current study was to conduct student focus groups to gather post-pandemic student perspectives on challenges and institutional supports at Red Deer

Polytechnic (RDP). Findings from this project will be used to inform the RDP Mental Health Strategy for 2024 to 2027.

## **Literature Review**

### **Benefits of Post-Secondary**

Among Western societies, Canada holds some of the highest attendance rates for post-secondary, and according to the 2016 census, 54.0% of Canadians aged 25 to 64 had either college or university qualifications (Statistics Canada, 2017). These numbers are perhaps influenced by the effects of ongoing globalization which have shifted traditional workforce dynamics and skill requirements, with advanced education now being valued more highly than work experience in obtaining employment worldwide (Cassidy, 2015). Canadian employment data echoes this notion as the most recent reports show a 43% increase in employment opportunities for post-secondary graduates as opposed to employees who do not have post-secondary qualifications (Statistics Canada, 2020). In addition to increased employability and job security, post-secondary graduates earn higher wages, report higher levels of life satisfaction, engage in healthier lifestyles, rear healthier children, show increased resiliency and adaptability to life stressors, and hold higher civic responsibilities to their communities (Frenette, 2014).

Despite these benefits, a substantial number of Canadians are without post-secondary education (Statistics Canada, 2017). Previous literature surrounding post-secondary trends involve a complex set of barriers which might impede access to post-secondary for prospective students.

### **Barriers to Attendance and Retention**

Past studies have identified barriers to attendance and retention in Canadian post-secondary education, such as financial challenges, low socioeconomic status, a lack of academic preparedness, familial obligations, absence of professional goals, and not feeling a connection to campus (Chen, 2012; Curtis et al., 2023; Hall, 2016; Mueller, 2008). Therefore, it is crucial that post-secondary institutions address these challenges.

### **Traditional vs Nontraditional Students**

Modern college demographics show a combination of “traditional” and “nontraditional students” within the current student body (Choy, 2002; Radford et al., 2015). The U.S Department of Education defines a student as nontraditional if they possess one of the following characteristics: having delayed college attendance by a year or more; being 25 years of age or older; possessing a GED as opposed to a high school diploma; having dependents other than a spouse; being financially independent; living on their own; being of a minority or marginalized background; living with a physical or mental disability; enrolled in part-time studies; and working full-time while attending college (McFarland et al., 2019; National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). In contrast, traditional students are defined as those under 25; of a majority group; typically living on campus; as full-time students; often receiving financial aid from parents or guardians; working part-time or not at all; and enrolling immediately after graduating high school (McFarland et al., 2019; National Center for Education Statistics, 2009).

Interestingly, nontraditional students are the fastest-growing population of college undergraduates, with most current assessments estimating that about 75% of college students can be identified on various levels as nontraditional (Chen, 2017; Radford et al., 2015). When considering potential barriers to post-secondary students and their education, it is vital to consider the different life circumstances of students, which can greatly impact the trajectory of

both academics and quality of life while in academia (Babb et al., 2022). Given that nontraditional students are the majority in postsecondary education, their experiences should be given particular attention. Additionally, the impact of their shared post-secondary experiences on campus morale could be significant for all students, making it an intriguing area to examine both student and institutional dynamics.

When compared with their traditional counterparts, nontraditional students face a variety of challenges including: financial barriers; cultural/societal barriers; balancing family, work, and school; accessibility; challenges with modern technology usage, and more (MacDonald, 2018; Remenick, 2019). Furthermore, a comprehensive review by Ellis (2019) found that the more nontraditional characteristics a student possesses, the more barriers they will face, as their academic needs will often interfere with their personal lives, thus greatly impacting attrition rates.

By discussing the unique barriers faced by nontraditional students the intent is not to underestimate the challenges encountered by traditional students. Unfortunately, the reality is that nontraditional students do experience more barriers than their traditional counterparts, however, there are also challenges which are common to the student experience regardless of traditional or nontraditional status.

### ***Financial Barriers***

Financial barriers represent one of the most significant obstacles that students face in accessing and completing post-secondary education (Mueller, 2008). Financial challenges not only influence the initial decision to pursue higher education but also impact students' ability to continue and complete their studies. Statistics show over 64.3% of undergraduate students had to borrow student loans at one point within a four-year degree (National Center for Education

Statistics, 2014), however just over half, or 58.3%, of post-secondary students relying on loans and grants successfully earned a degree after their first year of enrollment (Shapiro et al., 2018), meaning a substantial number of these students withdrew from their studies. Data from the National College Health Assessment (NCHA, 2019) demonstrates that 75% of students had experienced moderate to high financial distress in the past 12 months. Insights into specific financial stressors highlighted by Moore et al., (2021) found cost of tuition, textbooks, student fees, and inability to purchase other essential academic material negatively impacted students' academic performance (GPA), their social functioning/belongingness, and their academic self-confidence – each of which are key indicators of student drop out.

### ***Homelessness and Food Insecurity***

Living expenses associated with attending post-secondary institutions such as housing, food, transportation, and healthcare require substantial financial resources, further exacerbating the financial strain placed on students (Robb, 2017). Data collected from a survey of over 1,000 Canadian post-secondary students revealed that over a quarter (28%) of students experienced homelessness during their post-secondary studies (Danis & Herlick, 2022). This most commonly took the form of provisionally accommodated living situations, such as living with friends or family temporarily (22%) or in a hotel, motel, or Airbnb (10%). Students also experienced unsheltered living situations, such as sleeping in a campus building that was not a living space (5%), in their vehicle (3%), or entirely unsheltered (2%). When asked what led to their experience(s) of homelessness, students commonly shared that they were unable to find affordable or safe housing, and that financial aid did not adequately cover these expenses. Moreover, data collected by the Hope Center on students at over 100 colleges showed that almost half of the students (45%) experienced food insecurity in the past 30 days, with most of



them (39%) having maximized the institutional foodbank support system (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019). These students lacked both institutional and familial supports, reporting that inadequate living situations tremendously impacted their academic engagement, with some students leaving their programs in worse standing than prior to entering (Robb, 2017).

### ***Socioeconomic Status***

Amongst students experiencing financial constraints, individuals from low-income backgrounds are often disproportionately affected (Allan et al., 2019). Program completion surveys confirm that economically challenged youth are four times less likely than their more affluent peers to earn a degree within 6 years (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). Tompsett and Knoester (2023) highlight the plausible causes of this phenomenon by delving into how family socioeconomic status greatly influences children's life outcomes through their environments, lack of availability of resources, neighbourhood social contexts, and type of schools attended, which all together often discourage motivation of pursuing post-secondary education due to differing priorities and life expectations more prevalent around employment than studies. Therefore, the challenges surrounding post-secondary for low-income students are even apparent prior to their attendance at an institution. Garriott (2019) explains how students from lower social class backgrounds may experience more challenges in attending post-secondary due to higher sentiments of disempowerment and marginalization. Past studies support this sentiment by revealing children from advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds have more opportunities, safeguards, and privileges as opposed to those of disadvantaged backgrounds for which research has revealed increased risks for chronic stress, financial strains, and hardships (Britt et al., 2017; Joo et al., 2008). Adding on to this, research has consistently found that low-income students felt a strong

sense of social comparison to their classmates and a class separation due to their additional personal stressors (Moore et al., 2021). Students often reported as having felt lacking in academic preparedness when compared to their peers due to being generally unfamiliar with post-secondary environments or process as a result of not having parental guidance or close relations with anyone who completed higher education (Moore et al., 2021).

Pratt and associates (2019) examined how socioeconomic status impacted first-generation and economically marginalized college students. They found that economically marginalized first-generation students were significantly more concerned about money and expected to maintain employment throughout their college career at higher rates. This emphasis on work reduced the amount of time first-generation students engaged in college-related activities which hindered their opportunity to perform well academically, their ability to fit into the campus environment and make new friends, compared to their peers. Various researchers have found students of lower socioeconomic status to be more likely to struggle with financial stress, limited occupational attainment, and lower academic satisfaction which were often likely to force withdrawal from either classes or entire programs (Allan et al., 2016; Brown & Lent, 2016; Cattaneo et al., 2019; Garriott, 2019). Ipsos-Reid (2004) found that Canadians often overestimate the cost of post-secondary education while underestimating the benefits of earnings post-graduation, therefore deterring potential students from enrolling. The effects of this was found to be especially large amongst low-income Canadians, who reported a greater tendency to discredit their abilities of receiving critical financial aid through scholarships, loans, and grants which influences post-secondary participation decisions (Usher, 2005).

Garriott (2019) used these findings to develop the critical cultural wealth model (CCWM) of academic and career development, which provides a framework for understanding connections

between students' experiences of power, privilege, and oppression and their academic, career, and psychological outcomes. The CCWM proposes that structural and institutional conditions shape socioemotional experiences while in college, including one's perceptions of campus cultural fit, social capital for navigating college culture, and emotional–psychological connections between school and family (Allan et al., 2023; Garriott, 2019). Together, these studies point to how a general lack of information about the process of post-secondary as well as the perceived cost versus benefit impacts the decision of pursuing higher education, particularly for youth, however further existing studies point at how socioeconomic status and family might influence prospects students who are not the typical age range of post-secondary students and often come with additional existing responsibilities (Chen, 2017).

### ***Family Caregiving***

One study of dual-income couples found that 40% of the sample continued their education at some point as a response to the rapidly changing job market (Hostetler et al., 2007). Furthermore, women are participating in adult education in greater numbers than their male counterparts (Compton et al., 2006; NCES, 2008). While they may seek educational opportunities to advance their career, the commitment and effort needed in the short-term in adopting a student role often comes in conflict with familial roles and work roles. Thus, mature students with caregiving responsibilities typically experience what is known as role strain, which is simply defined as experiencing difficulty in meeting the demands of separate life roles (Goode, 1960). Role strain is further subdivided into: (1) role conflict occurs when meeting the demands of multiple roles interfere with each other; (2) role overload occurs when there is a lack of resources to the demands of a role; and (3) role contagion occurs when preoccupation with one role while being engaged in another (Chen, 2017; Goode, 1960). Mature caregiving students'

engagement with higher education is impacted by the intersection of role strain and life stressors, and conflicts between these roles have been found to be a significant predictor of psychological distress, disengagement with post-secondary education, and thoughts of withdrawal (Chartrand, 1990; Chen, 2017; Markle, 2015). Existing studies on mature students with family caregiving responsibilities found that scheduling availability impacted programs and schools attended, with mature students often choosing a less vigorous and demanding program with the aim of balancing personal and academic responsibilities (Berger & Milem, 2000). Due to this, preference was noticed for schools which provided a more flexible learning environment (Allan et al., 2023).

### ***Institutional Factors***

Most studies on student persistence or dropout rates within higher education have focused on student characteristics and behaviour, illustrating a student-centered research tradition (Smart et al. 2006). Few studies have examined what institutions can do to create conditions that promote student academic persistence (Berger & Milem, 2000). Titus (2004) found that a lack of institutional flexibility or accommodation can disproportionately impact students with physical or learning disabilities, limiting their ability to fully participate in post-secondary education. Moreover, the relationship between institutions' faculty and staff characteristics and student perceptions has been found to positively influence academic persistence and negatively influence dropout (Schuster 2003; Tinto & Pusser 2006). Results from these studies found that the ability to connect to post-secondary staff increased levels of help-seeking to improve student experiencing hardships while attending schools. Characteristics factors such as high sociability, self-efficacy, experience teaching, and certification were found to positively influence student academic success (Tinto & Pusser 2006). Instructors with these characteristics displayed more

confidence in their teachings, had higher expectations of students' long-term academic success while rating student achievement more greatly. The importance of establishing good student and instructor rapport was further analyzed by Rumberger and Tomas (2002) who found that schools with higher student to teacher ratios tend to have lower retention rates due to students being able to familiarize themselves with both their instructors, course content, and course expectations. This allowed students to feel more confident in their ability to succeed within their studies and programs. Furthermore, studies on institutional practices found that colleges placing higher priority and expenditures on student services through the offices of admissions, registrar, student counseling, financial resources, and student activities had lower attrition rates, suggesting that what institutions “do” affects student outcomes more than what institutions “are” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Thus, it is hypothesized that institutional characteristics, faculty cultures, financial resources, and internal structural or policy considerations are, in varying capacity, affecting academic persistence and student experiences, mental health during and post-graduation, as well as an important area of future study (Kim, 2007).

### **Post-Secondary and Mental Health**

Educational research has found that mental health and successful adaptation to post-secondary are crucial determinants in degree completion versus student dropout (Auerbach et al., 2016; Marcotte et al., 2015). A variety of interpersonal and intrapersonal challenges, often coinciding with one another, have been found to influence a student's transition into post-secondary on social, psychological, and academic levels (Curtis et al., 2023; Eells, 2017; Hall, 2016; Walburg, 2014). Numerous studies have found that poorly adjusted post-secondary students experience a higher prevalence of anxiety, depression, eating disorders, substance abuse, and other mental health issues (Daddona, 2011; Ibrahim et al., 2013; Lattie et al., 2019; Marcotte

et al., 2015). Youth and young adults are seen to be at an increased risk as three out of every four mental health problems are first diagnosed between the ages of 16 and 24, many while attending or freshly out of post-secondary programs (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2020). Moreover, research has indicated that suicide is the second leading cause of death for Canadians between the ages of 15-25 (Malla et al., 2018), and the second leading cause of death for post-secondary students in the United States (Wilcox et al., 2010). A plausible explanation to these concerning statistics can be correlated to the low rate of mental health treatment in individuals engaging in self-harm and suicide in this age group (Flett & Hewitt, 2013; Malla et al., 2018). This is supported by a study conducted in Ontario which found that only 66 out of the 370 adolescents who committed suicide between 2000 and 2006 had received previous psychological intervention (c.f. et al., 2023; Soor et al., 2012). Moreover, The American College Health Association (2013) reported that only 24% of students who experience depression in the United States receive treatment. Overall, findings from previous research reveal a higher incidence of mental health issues than before, especially among post-secondary students, and particularly for young adults. The correlation between low treatment rates and negative mental health within post-secondary students also points out possible institutional factors and areas of consideration.

Uncertainties felt during the COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these issues, with students reporting feeling even more anxious, depressed, fatigued, and depressed than prior to the pandemic (Elharake et al., 2022; Patterson et al., 2021). Furthermore, many students had trouble adjusting to online learning (Verma et al., 2021) and could no longer turn to social activities as a form of socio-emotional coping (Tasso et al., 2021).

Past research highlights the complexity of the post-secondary experience for students and the prevalence of adverse effects on well-being. The link between the age range and onset for young adults highlights the importance of learning how to best navigate this transitional period. Other demographic considerations such as low-income and socio-cultural minorities should be carefully considered when examining post-secondary experiences related to mental health, as these students are often disproportionately impacted by added challenges. Based on previous findings, successful adaptation to higher education is influenced by individual and institutional factors, therefore, continuous assessment of student experiences is necessary in promoting resilience and quality of life for active students (Chen, 2012; Heck et al., 2014; Webber et al., 2013).

### **Assessment Measure**

Several tools have been developed to assess the post-secondary student experience, including the American College Health Association's National College Health Assessment II Survey (NCHA II), which is a nationally recognized survey that collects data about post-secondary students' health across nine different sections (American College Health Association [ACHA], 2016). Composed of 300 questions, the NCHA II survey reports how students score within the categories of: (A) General Health; (B) Disease and Injury Prevention; (C) academic impacts; (D) violence, abusive relationships, and personal safety; (E) tobacco, alcohol, and marijuana use; (F) sexual behavior; (G) nutrition and exercise; (H) mental health; and (I) sleep (ACHA, 2016). Results from ten Alberta post-secondary institutions showed more than half of the attending students felt overwhelming anxiety, hopelessness, and loneliness. Moreover, 42% of students reported being in a state of depression which impacted their ability to function (ACHA, 2016). Some mental health diagnoses were also reported, 18.9% for anxiety

and 15.4% for depression, both conditions were actively treated by professionals at the time. The most concerning reports were those regarding intentions of self-harm, with 13.1% of students reporting having suicidal ideations, and 2.1% attempting suicide during their studies (ACHA, 2016).

It is important to note these findings are from 2016 and the uncertainty and health-related concerns associated with COVID-19 present additional stressors such as those indicated by Elharake and colleagues (2022). Combined, these factors can take a toll on the mental health and well-being of post-secondary students. Ongoing assessments of factors impacting students and their academics, as well as their personal lives are paramount in understanding how to best support them during their academic journey.

### **Current Efforts to Support Post-Secondary Students**

The Government of Alberta recognizes the connections between students' mental health and well-being to their academic performance, learning capacity, program retention, as well as future professional success (Government of Alberta, 2024). In response to the NCHA II survey, they have gathered a panel of experts, including post-secondary students, faculty, and staff, as well as mental health personnel from Alberta Health Services and the Canadian Mental Health Association to develop long-term support strategies for post-secondary students. The result of this initiative was a seven-step plan to promote academic success in students. Currently, governmental bodies are collaborating with post-secondary institutions to instill higher resiliency on campus and surrounding communities, decrease student barriers to higher education, increase mental well-being of attending students, and decrease dropout rates. This initiative reflects one of the many ways Canadian post-secondary institutions aim to increase student well-being through the breakdown of physical and psychological barriers.



## Well-Being in Post-Secondary Students

Singularly defining well-being is complex. Subjective well-being can be investigated in terms of life satisfaction, whereas psychological well-being focuses on development (Keyes et al., 2002). Psychological well-being focuses on Self-Determination Theory (SDT). SDT is composed of three main components: self-acceptance, positive relations with others, and environmental mastery (Deci & Ryan, 1980; Keyes et al., 2002). As stated by Kern and colleagues (2014), well-being is abstract and includes both feeling well and functioning well. This best represents Keyes and Lopez's (2002) classification of well-being. This two-dimensional model consists of levels of well-being and level of mental illness. Resulting in four main categories: Flourishing, struggling, floundering, and languishing. The model represents many aspects essential to defining well-being (Keyes & Lopez, 2002). Adding to this complexity, well-being is composed of many different components; for example, life satisfaction, quality of life, and prosperity can all impact well-being (Avic, 2023; Kern et al., 2014; Seligman, 2011). It is important to note that having positive subjective well-being is not just the presence of positive emotions, such as happiness and optimism (Arslan, 2021; Arslan & Allen, 2020; Furlong et al., 2014; Keyes, 2003; Su et al., 2014; Yıldırım et al., 2021). There must also be a lack of negative emotions or feelings, such as depression and loneliness (Arslan, 2021; Arslan & Allen, 2020; Furlong et al., 2014; Keyes, 2003; Su et al., 2014; Yıldırım et al., 2021).

To further an understanding of well-being, Seligman developed the PERMA Model. This model is comprised of five main components. The first is positive emotions, meaning the pleasure-seeking feelings associated with happiness (Forgeard et al., 2011; Kern et al., 2014; Seligman, 2011). Next is engagement, which represents an individual participating in genuinely enjoyable activities and being completely focused (Forgeard et al., 2011; Kern et al., 2014;

Seligman, 2011). Then the relationships pillar is one of the most important aspects of well-being (Forgeard et al., 2011; Reis & Gable, 2003). Relationships involve social connection and the feeling that one is cared for or valued (Forgeard et al., 2011; Kern et al., 2014; Seligman, 2011). Meaning is achieved when an individual feels that their life has value and a greater purpose (Forgeard et al., 2011; Kern et al., 2014, Seligman, 2011). Lastly, accomplishment is the ability to believe that one can achieve anything (Ericsson, 2002; Forgeard et al., 2011; Kern et al., 2014; Seligman, 2011). The purpose of this model is that if an individual has all aspects, one has achieved an overall positive well-being.

Due to the increase in mental health disorders among post-secondary students, many institutions have examined ways of increasing well-being for students. One of these is exploring the effects of campus climate on well-being. Campus climate can be defined as an individual's "attitude about, perceptions of, and experiences within a specified environment" (McGuirk & Frazer, 2021; Rankin and Reason, 2008). Some researchers have found that a student's perception of their campus climate can either positively or negatively impact their mental health (Chen et al., 2016; McGuirk & Frazer, 2021; Negash, 2017). A negative campus climate can negatively affect a student's mental health and has been shown to be a predictor of depression (Cress & Ikeda, 2003; McGuirk & Frazer, 2021). However, this can be counteracted by a supportive environment provided from professors and other staff, lessening the negative symptoms of mental health (McGuirk & Frazer, 2021; Mitchell et al., 2016; Potts, 2017). Additionally, encouraging students to find help through the institution can contribute to positive well-being. (McGuirk & Frazer, 2021).

### **Student Help-Seeking**

Goodwin and associates (2016) reported the most prominent barrier to the utilization of services provided on campus was an overall lack of student understanding regarding the role of the counselling center. Additionally, factors such as a lack of familiarity, mistrust of healthcare providers, lack of communication, lack of perceived urgency, skepticism, and stigma, have all been recognized as barriers to both service delivery and access on campus (Eisenberg et al., 2011; Ibrahim et al., 2013; Mowbray et al., 2006).

Gender and cultural differences may also serve as barriers to help-seeking behaviour (Curtis et al., 2023). In North America, research indicates that women are overall more likely than men to seek professional help in response to both mental and physical health concerns (Morgan et al., 2003). In terms of seeking mental health support, men consistently display more negative attitudes than women (Addis & Hahalik, 2003; Morgan et al., 2003; Vogel & Webster, 2003). Moreover, Morgan and colleagues (2003) found that students of Asian descent are less likely than White students to seek counselling services, which they attributed largely to diverging cultural beliefs regarding mental illness. For some students, pedagogical or cultural barriers can create a feeling of being ‘different’. However, the stigma surrounding the disclosure of mental illness is emphasized as a barrier to service access regardless of gender, race, or ethnicity (Addis & Hahalik, 2003; Morgan et al., 2003; Vogel & Webster, 2003). Liu and colleagues (2022) highlighted two urgent priorities considering current post-secondary student mental health needs: (1) ensuring access to available mental health services, and (2) outreach to students with special circumstances (e.g., low-income, as well as racial, sexual, and gender minorities).

### **Belongingness and Connection to Campus**

A powerful way to mediate various barriers is through enhancing social connection and belonging. As stated previously, having positive relationships with others is one of the main

pillars of positive well-being. Baumeister and Leary (1995) postulated the Need to Belong Theory, stating that humans are driven to form significant interpersonal relationships. Many researchers have supported the idea that having a sense of belonging is a primary contributor to our overall well-being in various contexts. Research suggests that belongingness and social support can act as a buffer or protective factor for students (Arslan, 2022; Moeller et al., 2020). Social support can be defined as the psychological support that one receives, such as emotional support (Chen et al., 2023; Song & Son, 2011). When students have a high sense of belonging, they have an increased quality of life and experience lower levels of negative psychological symptoms such as depression and loneliness (Arslan, 2021; 2022; Avci, 2023).

Post-secondary students can achieve a subjective feeling of belonging through academic engagement. Academic engagement consists of students attending classes, participating in extracurricular activities, and talking with peers and professors, which is often necessary for the academic success of the student (Chen et al., 2023; Schoffstall et al., 2013). Marler and associates (2021) found a positive relationship between academic motivation and belonging. Stating that students who felt like they had a place in their institution and were accepted by their peers and instructors had a higher drive to learn (Marler et al., 2021). Importantly, if students feel a lack of belonging, their academic motivation and life satisfaction are at risk (Acvi, 2023; Suhlmann et al., 2018). Additionally, previous research has found that having a low sense of belonging was a primary contributor to students leaving their post-secondary studies (Suhlmann et al., 2018).

An additional way students can feel a sense of belonging is to their campus, which has many of the same benefits (Chen, 2023). One avenue for students to be able to connect to campus is through instructors and faculty within the institution. A qualitative study done by

Schreiner and associates (2011) found several themes around how staff make a difference for students. The themes found showed that instructors who had; “(a) a desire to connect with students, (b) [were] aware of their influence on students at critical junctures, (c) [wanted] to make a difference in students’ lives, (d) [demonstrated] a wide variety of personality styles and strengths but being perceived as genuine and authentic [to students], (e) [were] intentional about connecting with students, (f) [used] different approaches [to connect], (g) differences in the types of behaviours that community college students reported as fostering to their success” (Schreiner et al., 2011, pg. 325-326). For example, instructors who sought genuine connections with students and did so through various channels, such as in the classroom or during office hours, made the largest impact on students. Additionally, instructors who were passionate about teaching and displayed positive emotions in relation to their courses benefitted students as well.

These themes were specifically found to be beneficial to high-risk students (Schreiner et al., 2011). However, another main contributor is the timing that the support is offered to the student, especially if the student is considering leaving their studies (Schreiner et al., 2011). Due to the importance of belongingness, it is vital that post-secondary institutions create targeted interventions to ensure students’ needs to belong are being met.

### **Current Study and Design**

A qualitative design was implemented to collect student perspectives and experiences on well-being and social connectedness on campus and to each other. This approach was chosen as qualitative data collection allows for more focused, in-depth, and complex information regarding the topic of study (Kamberelis et al., 2013). Focus groups and written responses with RDP students were conducted to assess their experiences including: What RDP is doing well to support student well-being? What challenges are students facing that impact their academic

success and/or well-being? What can be done to improve student services/support? And how can the institution foster campus connections and social support to reinforce a sense of belonging? (see Table 1 for the full list of questions). These questions were designed to uncover a multitude of barriers students may be facing, such as financial concerns, sociability on campus or amongst peers, academic motivation, stressors, and areas of institutional improvement. This research project will complement findings from the Canadian Campus Well-being (CCWS) Survey, and combined, the findings will be shared and used for the formation of the new RDP Student Mental Health Strategy for years 2024 to 2027. This project received ethics approval from Red Deer Polytechnic's Research Ethics Board December 5<sup>th</sup>, 2023, and focus groups were conducted from January 23<sup>rd</sup> until February 13<sup>th</sup>, 2024.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants were students recruited from Red Deer Polytechnic within any credit, non-credit, or trades program, full-time or part-time. Recruitment of participants was through flyers around campus, digitalized flyers containing QR codes, as well as promoted online through the Research Common website of RDP. Tables were also set up around campus occasionally to help promote the participation opportunity.

There was a total of 69 students who participated in the study; 40 students took part in focus groups and 29 participants provided written responses. The sample primarily consisted of Caucasian and South Asian ethnicities, 38% (N = 24) and 35% (N = 22) respectively. With a gender distribution of 50.7% identifying as female (N = 35), 40.6% male (N = 28), and 5.6% non-binary (N = 1). Lastly, 55.1% of the sample were first-year students (N = 38), 13.0% were

second-year students (N = 9), 14.5% third year (N = 10), and 13.0% fourth year (N = 9). Two participants had not provided demographics.

For their time and effort, participants within focus groups received a five-dollar Tim Horton's gift card, and their name was entered in a draw to win one of three well-being baskets, each valued at \$50.00. Participants who provided written responses received a five-dollar Tim Horton's gift card as an incentive for their participation in the study.

## **Materials**

For the focus group portion, to ensure the accuracy of quotes, researchers used a software called Glean, a recording and transcribing website, as well as a backup digital recorder. The tables were set up in a circular formation, to ensure equality between participants and researchers and facilitate a sharing circle style discussion format. For the written response questions, research assistants set tables up around the Red Deer Polytechnic campus asking students to fill out the questions on paper (see Table 1 for the full list of questions).

## **Procedure**

### ***Focus Groups***

Twelve in-person focus groups, lasting approximately 50 minutes each, were conducted in various RDP classrooms. Upon entry, participants were asked to sit around a table. Participants were then given a package which contained the demographics sheet, informed consent form, the questions, and a contact sheet with resources and researcher information (see Appendices A, C, D, H, I). In addition to this package, the participants were also given a small slip of paper to write their name and email to be entered into a draw box for a well-being basket. This draw box was kept in a locked cabinet, along with the consent and demographic sheets for the duration of the project. After which was moved to the principal investigator's locked office.

To begin, one researcher read out the informed consent and asked permission for the session to be recorded (see Appendix E). To ensure fairness, participants were handed a sharing stone and instructed to only speak when they have the stone and to keep their answers clear and concise. The other researcher then began asking questions (see Table 1 for the full list of questions). Some focus groups began with a different question, to ensure coverage of all questions throughout the discussions. However, each session did end with question six, as this was an open-ended question to allow participants to express anything else they would have liked to talk about, or circle back to. Recording stopped after all questions were answered, and researchers provided the gift card incentive to participants along with a session debrief (See Appendix G). At the end of data collection, the researchers drew three winners of the well-being baskets. As requested by the ethics board winners were asked to complete a skill-testing question to comply with Canadian lottery regulations prior to receiving their prize.

### ***Written Responses***

Written response participants were recruited using tables which were set up on multiple parts of campus. Upon agreement to participate in the study, students were given the same instructions and documentation as focus group participants (see Appendix A, C, D, E, G, H, I), however, since there was no recording, participants were asked to instead provide their responses on the paper which contained the questions. Their responses were collected and stored in the same locked filing cabinet. All participant responses from either focus groups or written responses were transcribed and analyzed.

### **Analysis**

All focus groups were audio recorded and files were transcribed verbatim via Glean and correctness of transcription was verified by the researchers. The final coding guide and all



transcripts were reviewed by the researchers to ensure that they accurately captured the topics discussed in the focus groups. Data were then theme analysed by two independent coders. The purpose of coding independently was to increase interrater reliability. Upon finalization of independent coding, the researchers compared themes to discuss discrepancies and arrive at mutual agreement for key themes. Thematic analysis was used to produce categories and concepts which were then organized hierarchically into themes and subthemes. SPSS software was used to summarize the descriptive statistics on participant demographics.

## **Results**

Thematic analysis uncovered four overarching themes: (1) financial challenges and frustrations, (2) accessing supports, (3) faculty and program; and (4) connection and campus climate (For themes and sample quotes see Tables 2-5). There was considerable overlap within student responses across all questions including the last one, despite it being open-ended. Thus recurring themes emerged across all questions; and as a result it was then deemed more appropriate to focus on those larger themes and subthemes across all five questions than theming per question.

### **Financial Challenges and Frustrations**

***Tuition and Other “Hidden” Fees (Table 5).*** The majority of students mentioned utilizing various student loans, grants and scholarships in order to attend post-secondary ( $n = 57$ , 82.6%), a few students mentioned fully funding their studies with their own money ( $n = 3$ , 4.3%), and the rest ( $n = 9$ , 13.1%) students did not specify. Costs of post-secondary was mentioned to be very financially challenging, with increasing costs of tuition making it more difficult for students to remain in full-time studies ( $n = 24$ , 34.8%). Moreover, students mentioned other fees in addition to tuition furthered their financial stress, those being “student

wellness fees, gym fee, [and being placed under the] insurance [healthcare program] automatically”. Further frustrations were mentioned by this breakdown of added fees where they “[found] it ridiculous that [they] have to pay money to support the gym at the college, which is awesome, but then [they] have to buy [their] own membership to then go to the gym that [they] have paid to support already.”

Students mentioned how the policy of full-time students being added to the health plan automatically is frustrating since they were never asked to opt in, but instead they had to source ways to opt-out through the “Student Connect or Students Association” which was difficult and challenging to navigate. For example, one student said that “improving the financial circumstances for students would be to make it more clear on what [they are] paying for, like explanations of what that is, and then options to just not pay for it because like if you're not going to go to the gym here and ever why would you pay for the gym”. Another “unnecessary” fee was mentioned ( $n = 14$ , 20.2%) by students for “a delivery fee for online textbooks to be delivered to your email”.

Overall, financial stress was experienced as particularly challenging at the beginning of the term as students ( $n = 27$ , 39.1%) mentioned “after paying tuition, [they] don't have money to get textbooks”. Thus, preference was given to courses that did not have added costs “when [they are] registering [they] a symbol for no textbook cost [they are] more inclined to register for that class because [they] know that will alleviate some financial strain going forward”. Furthermore, another student mentioned how helpful this is because “whenever [they] take a class with a free textbook it allows [them] to spend that money elsewhere”.

Lastly, scholarships and grants were mentioned to be extremely helpful in relieving financial concerns ( $n = 38$ , 55%), however, the qualifications for those posed a barrier for some

students. One student mentioned being able to benefit from these but when they “asked [staff] members about scholarship programs they [did not] have any for non-credit programs which is really awkward since they have them for other courses on main campus...our course is also important for RDP.”

***Residence and Parking.*** Living expenses were mentioned to heavily weigh on students. Many ( $n = 48$ , 69.5%) expressed “[living] on tight budgets” while others ( $n = 17$ , 24.6%) mentioned “the stress from the budget and worrying about food and shelter [has impacted their] overall mental well-being.” A few students ( $n = 7$ , 10.1%) mentioned balancing living expenses with their academics and how “[their] rent just went up and [they are] considering taking less classes again or even considering dropping out to just go back to work because [they would] rather have money to live [their] life than be a student. Others ( $n = 4$ , 5.8%) mentioned the inability to cover all expenses in the month and trying to make do by “telling the residence office to hold off on payment because it's coming but it was barely enough to actually cover it”. Insufficient financial aid also dictated whether students decided to work or not during their studies ( $n = 14$ , 20.2%), with one participant mentioning how “[they] find it hard to live off of the government grant that is given and [they] actually started working last term in order to supplement that which means that like [their] education suffered because [they] had to change modes all the time and have a brain and school brain”, while another mentioned how “this year [was] the first year that [they have] had the privilege of not having to work [and that] the only reason [they were] able to do that [was] because of having support from [their] spouse.

Parking was another main contributor to financial stress for students ( $n = 33$ , 47.8%), with some “[finding] it so interesting that [they] pay what [they] pay for tuition, and yet [they] still have to pay hundreds of dollars to park”. Others ( $n = 5$ , 7.2%) found the parking policy

stressful when they were not driving their vehicle as it was not registered under the parking pass, with one participant elaborating on “[having] a rental and it was stressful and anxiety ridden for [them] because like, [are they] going to get a ticket now?”.

***Amenities on Campus.*** Furthermore, many students ( $n = 45$ , 65.2%) expressed having financial struggles due to the limited amenities on campus. One student reported that “the only food [they] can afford here on campus is Tim Horton’s and everything is so expensive.” Another student echoed this sentiment, stating, “The pay-what-you-can program and stuff like that. Like, I know what it is, but if I were to go to the counter and be like, ‘Yeah, I want that,’ I wouldn’t know. That process intimidates me.” This lack of clarity created a sense of intimidation surrounding available resources, as another student admitted “the pay what you can, I’m like, okay, I’m poor. But I have 20 bucks, so what do you want from me? And I would never do something like that because it’s kind of open-ended.” Moreover, other food choices from campus, including the restaurant (Far Side), other stores and vending machines were said to be expensive, lacking variety, and generally unhealthy.

Many participants indicated that additional fees such as the gym and parking negatively impacted their well-being as when those fees are paid, it leaves many with little to live on for the semester. In addition to fees, many students face stressful living circumstances due to the increased cost of living. Overall, financial concerns appeared to be the largest stress in this participant sample.

### **Accessing Supports**

***Counselling (Table 3).*** The counselling center was the most well-known support on campus, with 50 participants mentioning the services (72.5%). Of the participants who were aware and had accessed the service ( $n = 21$ , 30.4%), most had positive experiences ( $n = 15$ ,

21.7%). For example many stated things such as “I enjoy the events hosted by the counselling center” or “[the] Counselling services are really good.” However, six out of those 21 students who had accessed the counselling services had stated negative experiences or perceptions. One participant stating “I had to wait at least three weeks for a counselling services appointment which isn't the best because I do need the help. I can wait a week, but when it comes to nearing a month that's only 4 appointments a semester” or “... [the counsellors] have said some concerning things .... that have prompted me to not go through them because they offer advice that isn't relevant to what you are going in for and can have a more negative impact on your situation.”

***Student Connect.*** Twelve out of the 69 participants (17.4%) mentioned barriers to their academic success being the campus student connect center, such as academic advising as well as the online tools, such as the grad tracker. Of those 12 who mentioned this service, 10 participants shared their negative experiences with the services. One participant stated “barriers would be student connect, academic advising, and grad tracker [as they] are not helpful tools or resources...” As well as indicating not be able to get an appointment “... academic advising ... [are not] entirely accommodating of a lot of student schedules and I believe they stopped doing appointments as well, which makes that more difficult to access...” Lastly, another concern were wait times, as many students had to wait extended periods of time for answers; “I had submitted my grad tracker for review and it took like six months [for a response].” Only two participants stated having an okay experience with the student connect center.

***Food Bank.*** The campus food bank and emergency fund were also brought up by participants ( $n = 12$ , 17.4%). Of those 12 students that mentioned it, only three (25%) had known about the supports, leaving nine (75%) who did not know these supports existed. One of the

participants that had accessed the food bank stated, “I had [accessed] the food bank last semester but this semester for some reason I couldn't access it” or those that tried stated it was “really confusing how you’re supposed to access the food bank.” Many of the participants mentioned not learning about the food bank or emergency funds until they were in their later years, with one participant stating, “something I just recently found out ... and I'm a third year, was we apparently have a food bank hamper thing.”

***Library supports.*** Eight of the total participants (11.6%) students explicitly noted Red Deer Polytechnic’s library support, consisting of the writing center, peer tutoring, accessibility supports, math supports, and learning strategies. Of those eight, three were unaware of the supports that were offered until later into their programs. With one student stating, “I didn’t know about the tutoring until the middle of my term, and I think knowing about it from the start would have helped me adjust better.” For those students that were aware and had accessed the services, all the feedback was positive. With many students stating the benefit, for example, “the writing center has changed my life, it is the greatest thing in the world, and I wish there was more awareness about it because I have talked to students who said they have never heard of it.”

Overall, the most well-known support at Red Deer Polytechnic was the counselling services. Of those participants who were aware of counselling and other supports, the consensus was positive. However, many participants were unaware of what Red Deer Polytechnic offers for academic support or have not used the services. Indicating a lack of awareness for the supports provided.

## **Faculty and Program**

***Instructor support (Table 4).*** Nearly half of the participants mentioned the importance of instructor support ( $n = 32$ , 46.4%). Of those 32 participants, 27 (84.4%) mentioned favourable

qualities of instructors, whereas five (15.6%) mentioned negative encounters. The importance of positive encounters with instructors was a main speaking point for many and can be summarized by this participant's quote: "I really think that we should be emphasizing, talking to our professors and creating interpersonal connections. I think the key to academia is, of course, doing well, but also having those supports within the sphere to help you move forward." Additionally, instructors were talked about favourably in terms of offering support and advertising the support within the institution. For example, one participant stated, "I find that the professors are all supportive, and I don't think I've had one teacher who hasn't said you're a student; we know what it's like ... I think they're very welcoming..."

However, there were some negative experiences with professors. The majority of these comments were made in reference to accommodations that students receive. One participant stated, "I am aware unfortunately of a lot of issues that have been going on specifically with faculty and accessibility, which has been an ongoing issue for quite some time and has been a pretty severe issue this current year."

***Program Management.*** Additionally, students mentioned having large workloads within their programs, creating difficulties and strain ( $n = 21, 30.4\%$ ). One participant asserted "a barrier is that some of the programs are so heavy. I feel as though you need to take a year of open studies, so you don't feel so burnt out and want to drop out in your second year." Additionally, the weight of program tasks has negatively impacted students' ability to form connections for example "I'm in my 3<sup>rd</sup> year of my [program], and I feel like I don't have a lot of time to be socially connected with a lot of people" or "I'm in the legal system program and we don't talk to each other."

An additional struggle that many new students mentioned was learning how to navigate blackboard (the system RDP uses for class information, assignments, and announcements) especially during online classes. For example, one participant vocalized "... I remember in COVID I didn't even know how to figure out Blackboard and they're different for every single professor..." Many students faced this frustration, especially in terms of how to access supports that the instructors place on blackboard, with participants stating "... it's like a little sub-tab that they talk about for 12 seconds then move on, so I do wish there was a bit more focus and attention put onto that..."

***Jobs and Career Prospects.*** There were 14 (20.3%) participants who mentioned jobs or careers. Of those 14 that mentioned jobs, ten (71.4%) stated that they required assistance in finding a job that was able to sustain them. For example, "... I believe you know the cost of tuition ... it's really so hard on us so we have to be just get a minimum wage job and it's not enough." Or for those 14 students that mentioned having a job ( $n=4$ , 28.6%), it often interfered with their ability to attend events to increase their connection on campus as well as their academics, "because of my multiple jobs it causes time conflicts and issues with time management. I can't really participate in the supports that are available because I am either focusing on work on school." Additionally, students expressed concern for prospects, some stating "I think there is a lot of uncertainty that our programs or degrees have. I think a lot of people are scared to move forward or don't know what to do with their degree."

Many students emphasized the importance of connecting with their instructors. Participants also mentioned struggling to balance their academics with other aspects of their lives as their programs are overwhelmingly demanding. Additionally, many participants stated that they require assistance in finding employment during and after their studies.



## Connection and Campus Climate

*Student Connection and Well-being (Table 2).* All 69 participants (100%) agreed that being able to connect to peers has improved their well-being, with students commenting on how connections have made them “enjoy school so much more”. Through connections, students expressed a higher sense of belonging, as “being able to communicate to other students more openly lets you know that you’re not the only one struggling”. Another student echoed this by saying that peer support “makes you feel like maybe it's not just you” and contrasted how important these shared experiences are since “someone from the outside might not understand how stressful school can be so having peers talking to each other can be very good to relate on experiences”. Some students ( $n = 8$ , 11.5%) reflected on earlier years where they did not experience as much connection and explained how “last year, I just went home after all my last days, I didn't talk to anybody and like life kind of sucked honestly” but then compared that experience with how social connection has improved their well-being and those of others “I feel like people around me are smiling more and having fun, I feel makes a lot of people want to just be on campus and helps people want to be in a learning environment as well”. Other students ( $n = 13$ , 18.8%) had stated in various ways that their ability to navigate campus and other necessities has been heavily influenced by peer support. Due to this, quite a few ( $n = 11$ , 15.9%) mentioned the idea of a “big brother big sister” program where “you pair up like a third or fourth year with her first year” to be a great initiative to help new students adapt to the new campus environment.

While there were no negative student perspectives on campus connections, their ability to connect to campus seemed to revolve around being on campus for a longer time, which was difficult to do “when all your amenities on campus close at like 3 pm, and especially when you

have people living on dorms, it's like I don't want to stay late because there's no food other than like a vending machine". Other students mentioned ( $n = 4$ , 5.7%) conflicting responsibilities as hindering their ability to connect "I have a family that I need to go home to like I anything that happens outside of like school hours I have no desire to go to because I have obligations elsewhere. People work too, part-time jobs and things".

***Connection and Academic Success.*** Connecting with peers was reported by many participants ( $n = 53$ , 75.8%) as an integral part of their academic success. This is illustrated by comments about how connection "motivates you as a student because you're able to compare and contrast what everyone else is doing and maybe get some tips on how to be better". Moreover, ( $n = 15$ , 21.7%) students mentioned studying in groups "makes studying go smoother and you're not so stressed about all of the studying you have to do". Studying in groups also showed to impact grades as a student mentioned how after studying with a classmate, they "did really well on the test, and [they] don't think [they] would have [otherwise because their] studying method is just [watching] a recorded lecture and [taking] notes, [their] friend [made] flashcards and [read] them back and forth [which] was a lot more helpful". Moreover, through connection students broadened their "contacts and opportunities which [helped them] move forward with [their] studies".

***Challenges to Connection.*** While all students recognized connection as important to their well-being, a few reported challenges with connecting to other students. These primarily stemmed from a lack of familiarity, with one student mentioning seeing "different cohorts like the people who grew up together and graduated from the same high school" and felt isolated since "coming from another town that is very difficult to combat when I don't know anybody." The lack of connection during Covid-19 was also used to explain the challenges in making new

friendships since students expressed how “for three years [they] were told not to make social connection, it's really, really hard to just jump back into real life.” When reflecting on how to form connections one student reported “no one knows how to anymore but we're all slowly learning again”, signifying an optimistic view on the current challenges socializing.

**Online Learning.** There were both benefits and limitations to online learning formats, with some students ( $n = 24$ , 34.7%) mentioning “there's benefits and drawbacks for online learning but for me in-person is also my favorite” and how “online is so isolating but more flexible which sometimes is needed”. Others ( $n = 14$ , 20.2%) mentioned struggling with learning how to navigate alternative learning formats which and how “[they] don't even enjoy the blended and stuff, [they] strive for being completely on campus if [they] can when making my schedule.”

**Social Events.** From an institutional lens, ( $n = 42$ , 60.8%) students expressed appreciation for the variety of social events on campus which fostered connection. Some examples given were the MindfulU program, intramurals and athletic programs, karaoke and bingo nights, puppy rooms, and teatime which have provided a “way to interact and destress after classes”. A few comments were made on how some of the sportier activities lacked equitable gender representation, with a student working for the institution explaining how “intramurals have a bunch of guys and I had some girls asking if its guys only because of it”. Additionally, another student explained the need for more social events that are aware of the addictive culture of post-secondary students and struggles with alcohol or drugs by saying how “the school offers a lot of social events like the karaoke nights and stuff like that but [they] also think there could be more social events outside of drinking and so on for students who are sober, facing addictions, or for students who don't want to be a part of that socializing factor”.

***Safe Spaces.*** Another institutional factor that played a role in student well-being on campus were efforts around inclusivity. One student highlighted this by saying “RDP has created a phenomenal and safe inclusive environment for people of different demographics”. Another added to this by expressing the how this has shaped campus climate since “everyone is friendly here which relieves a lot of stress”. Other students ( $n = 5$ , 7.2%) mentioned it being a safe environment since “[they] haven’t noticed anyone being bullied or shamed” as well as mentions of how “safe walks by the security is a great thing and makes students feel very safe”.

Furthermore, students ( $n = 31$ , 44.9%) expressed how their time on campus was made better by the safe spaces around campus including the meditation room which “helps a lot to clear your head”, as well as the prayer room, family room, all gender individualized bathrooms. The circle on campus was also mentioned ( $n = 11$ , 15.9%) for anyone to find connections who might be struggling with a language barrier. This was identified to be a safe and “very supportive place.”

***Student Groups.*** Lastly, student groups were seen as an important factor in enhancing students’ ability to connect ( $n = 41$ , 59.4%). One student explained how being a part of a society “can help us students to get a better knowledge of our surroundings on the basis of culture, interests, ethnicity”. Another supported this idea by mentioning how “it feels amazing like to experience new students and about their culture.” The importance of student societies was mentioned by various participants ( $n = 25$ , 36.2%) who have said in varying ways that they “don’t think [they] would have made friends without the society” and furthered this by saying how more awareness about them would benefit students since throughout the years members have found that for “lot of first years it goes under the radar you don’t know student societies exist”.

Overwhelmingly, all students highlighted the importance of connecting with other students. The institution's events and student groups are the primary paths for students to connect with each other. Many acknowledge that connecting with others positively contributed to their academics and well-being.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to uncover various barriers that RDP students may be experiencing, the supports they are benefiting from, and factors impacting their sense of connection, belongingness, and well-being on campus. The results from this study will be used by project partners to ensure that these findings are being considered during the development of RDP's new student mental health strategy, in conjunction with results yielded the CCWS.

Results from the focus groups provide further support for existing literature suggesting that financial concerns are a significant barrier to attendance and retention as well as academic success for RDP students. These findings align with Mueller (2008) who stated financial barriers represented one of the most significant obstacles that students face when accessing and completing post-secondary education. Consistent with findings by Moore and associates (2021) students in the current study reported the extraneous costs of post-secondary including tuition, textbooks, and student fees created financial stress, which then negatively impacted their academic success and motivation. In addition to this, work commitments have also been described to often overshadow academic goals for many students. According to these students, balancing the need to work to support themselves financially with the demands of academic life can be a significant barrier to success. The pressure to succeed academically and secure a promising career can contribute to heightened stress levels among students, with anticipated future employment prospects being one of the main contributors of stress alongside accumulated

debt. These findings are consistent with research by Pratt and colleagues (2019) and Garriott (2019) which have found that economically strained post-secondary students to experience higher rates of stress, hindering their opportunity to enjoy their time and experience while attending post-secondary.

Additionally, programs like "pay what you can" intended to aid financial stress were found to lack clarity, primarily around who qualifies and what the expected pay is, which ultimately deterred students from participating and potentially benefitting from these services. Current findings revealed that many students who relied on student loans or grants experienced tight budgets and were sometimes unable to meet all of their monthly expenses. In fact, 82.6% of the participants relied on student loans, grants, or scholarships. This is consistent with previous research stating that most students utilize financial aid at one point in their program (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). Moreover, the limited amenities on campus were also reported as a barrier due to their lack of variety and price of items, which further exacerbated the financial strain on students who wish to stay on campus.

Consistent with Goodwin and colleagues (2016), results from the current study suggest that there is an overall lack of knowledge pertaining to the supports offered on campus. More specifically, findings lend further credence to previous notions that students need to know what resources are available and how to access them to address their needs adequately. Demonstrated by many participants within our study was a general lack of understanding of supports. These knowledge shortcomings were reported to be mediated through connection to students and faculty as word of mouth. Some participants suggested they would be more inclined to investigate the supports if a staff member from that division visited their class, lessening the intimidation factor of navigating the supports themselves. In the instance that participants had

utilized the supports, the reviews were positive which signifies that when utilized, the supports on campus are effective for students. Students who have utilized these services, such as the writing center, hoped that knowledge of services would reach more students so that they could benefit in similar ways to improve their academic experiences and well-being while completing their studies.

The counselling center was the most well-known support on campus, with the majority stating that it is beneficial and a necessity. However, lengthy wait times hinder students' experiences who may require immediate or increased support to overcome mental health challenges. This coincides with previous literature which recognizes low treatment rates as correlated with increased mental health struggles (Flett & Hewitt, 2013; Malla et al., 2018). Many participants made suggestions such as allowing more walk-in days to accommodate for immediate supports. Understandably, counselling centres may have limited capacity to meet mental health demands of their student body, as they are operating within budgetary restrictions and can only hire so many counselling staff to support the needs of all students.

Other supports that were mentioned were the student connect center, academic advising, and grad tracker that RDP offers. This group of supports on campus received the most criticism, with lengthy wait times for responses and advisors exhibiting a lack of knowledge in some areas; participants expressed their frustrations with this service. An additional support that the institution offers is the student food bank and emergency fund. This was the least known support, where many participants were learning what it was in the later years of their program or for the first time during this study. As stated previously, food insecurity is common in post-secondary students' (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019). Many found the process of accessing food aid confusing to navigate or reported that because one is only allowed to access it a couple of times per semester,

the support lacks in helping continuing students who are living with financial constraints. Lastly, the library supports were mentioned frequently by participants as well. These supports include the writing center, peer tutoring, accessibility supports, math supports, and learning strategies, many of which students who had accessed these found many benefits, with some students stating, “it changed my life.” These positive affirmations highlight the need for increased awareness regarding campus supports and services to foster academic success in students. These impacts coincide with existing literature which highlights how institutional practices that prioritize students supports via various avenues such as provide students with a better environment to learn and continue learning, student counseling, financial resources, and student activities lowered attrition rates and increased student academic satisfaction (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Worth noting, is the consensus amongst students that faculty and instructors were reported to play a pivotal role in fostering academic self-efficacy and student motivation. Their encouragement, guidance, and belief in students' abilities can significantly impact students' confidence in their academic pursuits. Many of the participants stated that the instructors make a sincere attempt to form some sort of connection with their students, which many were grateful for. This aligns with previous research from Schreiner and colleagues (2011), who found that instructors intentionally making an effort to connect with their students had a large positive impact on students. Along the same lines, Webber and associates (2013) found that students acquire stronger academic and social skills from instructors who encourage open communication, provide active challenges, and encourage collaborative learning methods. From their research, this resulted in an improved academic experience for all students which has been found to be accurate within our sample as well. Worth noting is that there were some concerns



with instructors not accepting or allowing accommodations. This is an important consideration to make and for the purpose of the mental health strategy, it would be beneficial to enhance clarity and agreement around accommodations for both the instructor and students. Therefore, based on the student perspectives within this study, area of accommodations and their regulations grant some further exploration.

Additionally, program management was a concern for many. Some participants found it beneficial to take a year of open studies before applying to their specified program. This was done in an effort to lessen the financial and time-consuming load that many degree programs create. As this study has shown, the ability to attend campus events and form social connections are extremely important to students. When program demands become so high that it infringes on daily life, this negatively impacts students' ability to form social connections, and lowers their academic motivation (Suhlmann et al., 2018). Furthermore, students with added responsibilities stemming from employment or family caregiving encountered time management challenges when attempting to experience an academic social life. These students mentioned an inability to attend school events outside of their class hours due to a demanding schedule with work or family needs.

Overall, the current study found that connection and sense of belonging among post-secondary students was the main contributor to their academic success and well-being, as posited by the Need to Belong Theory (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Many students reported that peer support groups allowed them to flourish in their academics. In addition to instructors and faculty, having a supportive network of peers has been identified as an avenue for student emotional support, guidance, and encouragement, which are crucial for navigating the challenges of post-secondary life. This finding aligns with previous studies that have suggested that when

students study together, share notes, and communicate about course content, they show an increase in belongingness and well-being as well as decreased stress levels (Holloway et al., 2022). The participants highlighted the importance of connections which aligns with previous theories, such as the PERMA Model (Seligman, 2011). Where relationships to others is a vital pillar in achieving a positive well-being. There are several factors that impact a student's ability to connect with others on campus, such as awareness of events, work, or family responsibilities. This aligns with previous research indicating that students who have priorities other than their academic life experience role strain and difficulties in meeting the demands of their student and personal lives (Goode, 1960).

An important factor that has adversely impacted student connections was the COVID-19 pandemic and sudden switch to online learning. Students reported both difficulties to adapt to the new learning platform, which remains to be challenging for some courses. Additionally, there is a general lack of sociability after years of being isolated, which has increased student mental health struggles (Elharake et al., 2022; Patterson et al., 2021). In order to combat the negative lasting effects of the pandemic, many students engaged with student groups and use of safe spaces, such as the meditation room, the family room, and the circle, to form new social connections.

Overall, findings from this study highlight the various dimensions that impact a student's ability to succeed, with awareness of supports and social connection playing vital roles on the post-secondary experience. While this study does draw attention to the various barriers that students face, it is important to note that the majority of perspectives that students shared were positive in relation to their time at RDP, showing that the institutions efforts to increase quality of life are being noticed and having a meaningful impact on student experiences.

### **Considerations**

Some considerations warrant mention that could have affected the validity and interpretation of the findings. First, the restricted sample size composed of only RDP students may limit generalizability, which could raise questions about the applicability of the findings to other contexts, demographics, or institutions. Although application of findings to other populations is often a goal of psychological research, this applied study was aimed at looking specifically into the population at our campus to uncover the distinct experiences of students and their perspectives of our institution and their supports. The demographic breakdown of the participant sample did accurately encompass the student population at RDP, allowing this study to accurately depict student needs at RDP. Therefore, in this instance, prioritization of our population rather than reaching generally applicable findings was of priority in order to accurately represent our students and the course of action for policy change and formation of the new student Mental Health Strategy at RDP.

Moreover, the potential presence of social desirability bias and groupthink within focus groups could have influenced participant responses. Participants may have felt inclined to provide socially acceptable answers or conform to the opinions expressed by the group, potentially skewing the data and leading to biased conclusions. However, we believed that a shared experience amongst diverse students would yield for richer data within their responses. It can be more comforting to open up to a group of students who can relate with one's experiences, which could foster conversation and further awareness of how other students from differing programs or background navigate post-secondary. By conducting focus groups, we believed that it would result in more positive findings as well as positive experiences for participants since it was another avenue for them to socialize and potentially connect based on their shared

experiences. This outcome was preferred over individualized semi-structured interviews for data collection and for the freedom of students to report on what they deemed important aspects of their academic journey at our institution within a group environment.

The timing and location of focus group sessions were also noted as potential factors influencing participant attendance, even though efforts were made to provide various sessions during different times of the day to promote as many participations as possible of all attending students. Some sessions were specifically scheduled during trade lunches to afford non-credit students to join. Moreover, the tables set up for the written responses were also placed at the Downtown campus location in order to give students who do not visit the main campus a chance at speaking on their experiences. So, although timing and locations could have hindered the participation of some students, efforts were made to allow for as much flexibility and schedules as possible. These efforts and their success are reflected by the generous sample size within this qualitative research, as well as its vast demographic which we are extremely pleased with. It is important to note that this project had no accommodations for online responses, which limited participation to only those students physically present on campus. This could have affected the diversity and representativeness of the sample since no online student experiences were included, however, we believed that a good standing point for conducting research on campus barriers and supports were to delve into students who are regularly on campus and within its environment.

Finally, discussing sensitive topics during focus group sessions may have had unintended psychological impacts on participants. Delving into emotionally charged or personal topics could have evoked feelings of discomfort or distress, potentially making participants uncomfortable, even though careful considerations and steps were taken to ensure limited or no psychological distress was felt during the study. For this reason, researchers created an extensive contact sheet

for various in-person and online supports that participants were given post-participation should they require it. Alongside this, participants were given an introduction about the study prior to each session, as well as a debrief at the end and all questions or concerns were allotted time at the end of their respective sessions. Although this was accounted for, no participants verbalized any concerns which reflect that participation within the study was quite positive and a safe space to converse about their experiences and of others. One important aspect that was stressed by researchers surrounded the confidentiality of the conversations within each focus group, which participants confirmed. Another baseline for ensuring student respect was in the addition of a sharing stone for participants to have and pass around when they were sharing their thoughts. This allowed for all participants to have a fair chance at highlighting their thoughts on the questions asked, without any interruptions. In the case that they did not have anything to report, participants were instructed to say “pass” or anything similar and forward the sharing stone which signified that the next participant may begin. This system allowed for the creation of a stable, positive, and safe environment for both participants and researchers.

These considerations highlight the importance of carefully considering the methodological limitations of qualitative designs and potential biases inherent in the research process. Addressing these issues is essential for ensuring the integrity and reliability of the study findings and for drawing accurate conclusions about the topic under investigation, although for the purpose of this study, researchers agreed this was the most effective and ethical approach for everyone involved. While much psychological research stems within an area of quantitative or mixed design to gather numeric or objective results from their population, seeking to answer potential questions or test hypothesis which does have its own advantages. However, in this instance for the purpose of this study a qualitative approach was undoubtedly the correct and

adequate way to go. This is because our purpose was not to test a hypothesis, or gather numerical responses, rather the researchers entered this with an open mind and our study was concerned with gathering the subjective and personalized experiences of any student attending RDP and synthesizing these vast responses to formulate a holistic experience of students. Therefore, this methodology was that was most appropriate. The decision to use thematic analysis and quantify reoccurring themes was a way of this study to highlight the significance of each key term or service mentioned, which did introduce a bit of quantifiable results while still allowing for this research to be exploratory and creative in nature. It is important to mention once again that this study does work in conjunction with the CCWS, which is a campus wide survey that was sent out to students. Together, the results from this qualitative research study and the quantitative survey results will guide the formation of new institutional policies.

### **Benefits and Outcomes**

The primary objective of this study as previously stated was to obtain a comprehensive understanding of student experience at RDP and to explore the diverse range of experiences among the student body. This study aimed to provide a holistic view of the challenges, needs, and supports of students at RDP. By conducting focus groups, this research fostered shared and open conversation about both student barriers and their involvement within campus as well as their familiarity with institutional supports. Targeted questions were formulated to allow for the exploration of a multitude of barriers, supports on campus, sense of belongingness, serializability and well-being of students. These were intended areas for observation, guided by existing literature on post-secondary students attending school. Results from this study support what has been found in the studies explored, which further the importance of raising awareness of concerns such as financial, living, and food insecurity amongst post-secondary students.

Moreover, this study found that connection to campus made great impacts on student mental health and well-being, as well as increasing motivation for continuing success.

Through in-depth exploration and analysis, the study sought to uncover underlying themes and patterns that could shed light on the factors influencing student well-being and academic success. The aim is to use these findings and integrate them with other RDP specific research, either past or current, to be used within the development of the new student Mental Health Strategy for the years 2024 to 2027. By identifying key issues and areas of concern, the study outcomes can inform the strategic planning and future implementation of initiatives aimed at supporting student mental health and promoting academic success, as well as enhancing the overall well-being and academic outcomes of students to come. The need for focused and specialized initiatives within all institutions to improve campus climate and service utilization amongst students has been both explored and reported as advantageous within past studies (Curtis et al., 2023). Curtis and colleagues (2019) expand on the current trends of students in post-secondary institutions, which often come from a variety of backgrounds and don't always share the same demands. Students are diverse in terms of race, culture, and ideology; thus, they may experience differing barriers at differing levels. This is especially important when considering that research has often indicated that minority student populations are at increased risk for mental illness, psychological distress, and various challenges which means that generalized support plans might not adequately support their needs (Curtis et al, 2023). Moreover, not all institutions share the same limitations and strengths in terms of service delivery. Therefore, all institutions may benefit from initiating focalized research to obtain data that is unique to their student population (American Health Association [ACHA], 2013; Curtis et al., 2023).

Since participant experiences were not tied to their demographics, future research could focus on examining individualized cohorts within the institution. By exploring potential differences in experiences among distinct groups of students, such as different academic programs, demographic characteristics, or levels of engagement in campus social activities, future studies can provide deeper insights into the factors shaping the student experience at RDP. This qualitative approach to research can help to uncover nuanced differences and tailor interventions to better meet the unique needs of specific student populations, ultimately contributing to the creation of a more inclusive and supportive learning environment at RDP. From our observations, increasing awareness of supports to all students and ways to access it is the most important. Actionable steps that could be made towards this were mentioned to be increased classroom visits by accessibility personnel, or greater prioritization of instructors on what supports are available and how they can apply to students to enhance their time while completing their program. Moreover, increased clarity on who qualifies for student programs such as “pay what you can” that are intended to help students were reported to be intimidating to most students. Therefore, more conversation and information on programs targeted to aid students was suggested as a positive way to increase utilization. Overall, the report from students regarding the institution were positive, and the most noticeable area needing action is increasing awareness of student support.



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## Tables

**Table 1**

### *Focus Group Questions*

Question Number	Question
1	What are some supports or barriers to student academic success and well-being? What are we doing well on campus to support mental health and well-being and what are we doing poorly?
2	In what ways are student academic success and/or well-being being impacted by financial strain and/or living circumstances? How can we improve financial and/or living circumstances for students?
3	How do connections/social supports (or lack thereof) impact student academic success and/or well-being? How can we improve social support, connection, and belongingness for students?
4	To what extent has RDP developed a supportive, safe, and inclusive environment that contributes to a culture of student success, mental health, and well-being?
5	How socially connected do students feel on campus?
6	Is there anything else you would like to share with us?

**Table 2.***Connection and Campus Climate Common Themes*

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Participant Quotes</b>
<b>Student Connection and Well-being</b>  Connection to fellow students is a large indicator of student success and well-being	“motivates you as a student because you're able to compare and contrast what everyone else is doing and maybe get some tips on how to be better”. “makes studying go smoother and you're not so stressed about all of the studying you have to do” “[I] did really well on the test, and I don't think I would have if, like, because, like, my studying method is just like, I watch a recorded lecture and I take notes. My friend making flashcards and us reading them back and forth was a lot more helpful for that”. “contacts and opportunities which helps you move forward with your studies”
<b>Online Learning</b>  There were both benefits and limitations to online learning formats	“there's benefits and drawbacks for online learning but for me in-person is also my favorite” “online is so isolating but more flexible which sometimes is needed” “I don't even enjoy the blended and stuff, I strive for being completely on campus if I can when making my schedule.”
<b>Social Events</b>  From an institutional lens, students expressed appreciation for the variety of social events on campus which fostered connection	“way to interact and destress after classes” “intramurals have a bunch of guys and I had some girls asking if its guys only because of it” “the school offers a lot of social events like the karaoke nights and stuff like that but I also think there could be more social events outside of drinking and so on for students who are sober, facing addictions, or for students

	who don't want to be a part of that socializing factor”
<b>Safe Spaces</b>  The campus makes great efforts to ensure that inclusivity is at the forefront of everything it does	“RDP has created a phenomenal and safe inclusive environment for people of different demographics” “everyone is friendly here which relieves a lot of stress” “I haven’t noticed anyone being bullied or shamed” “safe walks by the security is a great thing and makes students feel very safe”
<b>Student Groups</b>  Student groups were found to be a very important factor for fostering connection	“can help us students to get a better knowledge of our surroundings on the basis of culture, interests, ethnicity” “it feels amazing like to experience new students and about their culture.” “don't think [they] would have made friends without the society” “lot of first years it goes under the radar you don't know student societies exist”

**Table 3:**



*Accessing Supports Common Themes*

Themes	Participant Quotes
<p><b>Counselling</b></p> <p>Many participants were aware of the counselling services on campus. Much of the feedback was positive, however, lengthy wait times hinder students from accessing the support.</p>	<p>“I enjoy the events hosted by the counselling center”</p> <p>“Counselling services is really good”</p> <p>“I had to wait at least three weeks for a counselling services appointment which isn't the best because I do need the help. I can wait a week, but when it comes to nearing a month that's only 4 appointments a semester”</p>
<p><b>Student Connect</b></p> <p>This theme consists of the student connect center, academic advisers, and grad tracker.</p>	<p>“Barriers would be student connect, academic advising, and grad tracker are not helpful tools or resources...”</p> <p>“I had submitted my grad tracker for review and it took like six months [for a response].”</p> <p>“... academic advising ... [are not] entirely accommodating of a lot of student schedules and I believe they stopped doing appointments as well, which makes that more difficult to access...”</p>
<p><b>Food Bank and Emergency Fund</b></p>	<p>“I had [accessed] the food bank last semester but this semester for some reason I couldn't access it”</p>

There was a lack of awareness regarding the student food bank and emergency fund, as well as confusion of how to access it.	was “really confusing how you’re supposed to access the food bank.”  “something I just recently found out ... and I'm a third year, was we apparently have like a food bank hamper thing.”
<b>Library Supports</b>  Library supports consists of tutoring, writing supports, and accessibility supports. Many participants were aware of the supports, however, there were some that were unaware. Of those that were aware, much of the feedback was positive.	“I didn’t know about the tutoring until the middle of my term and I think knowing about it from the start would have helped me adjust better.”  “The writing center has changed my life it is the greatest thing in the world and I wish there was more awareness about it because I have talked to students who said they have never heard of it.”

**Table 4:***Faculty and Program Common Themes*

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Participant Quotes</b>
<b>Instructor Support</b>  Instructor support is a large contributor to student success in post-secondary.	“I really think that we should be emphasizing, talking to our professors and creating interpersonal connections. I think the key to

	<p>academia is, of course, doing well, but also having those supports within the sphere to help you move forward.”</p> <p>“I find that the professors are all really supportive, and I don't think I've had one teacher who hasn't said you're a student; we know what it's like and I don't think you ever feel pressured or I mean everyone has stress but I think they're very welcoming so I think the staff, in general, are quite welcoming.”</p>
<p><b>Program Management</b></p> <p>Many students feel ill-prepared when starting PS. Additionally, the heavy loads prohibit students from forming connections.</p>	<p>“a barrier is that some of the programs are so heavy. I feel as though you need to take a year of open studies so you don't feel so burnt out and want to drop out in your second year.”</p> <p>“I think in my 3<sup>rd</sup> year of my film program. I feel like I don't have a lot of time to be socially connected with a lot of people”</p>
<p><b>Jobs and Career Prospects</b></p> <p>Many students stated requiring more assistance for finding a job, as well as uncertainty for their future careers with their degree's. As well as stating that having jobs outside of their education, prohibits them from partaking on campus events and connecting with other students.</p>	<p>“As for me as an international student I believe you know the cost of tuition ... it's really so hard on us so we have to be just get a minimum wage job and it's not enough.”</p> <p>“because of my multiple jobs it causes time conflicts and issues with time management. I can't really participate in the supports that are available because I am either focusing on work on school.”</p>

	<p>“I think there is a lot of uncertainty that our programs or degree's have. I think a lot of people are scared to move forward or don't know what to do with their degree.”</p>
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**Table 5:***Financial Challenges and Frustrations Common Themes*

Themes	Participant Quotes
<p><b>Tuition and other “Hidden” Fees</b></p> <p>Students mentioned other fees which are additional to tuition furthered their financial stress</p>	<p>“I hate seeing student wellness fee, I hate seeing students like gym fee, I hate seeing the like insurance automatically put in there”</p> <p>“like I find it ridiculous that I have to pay money to support at the gym at the college, which is awesome here, but then I have to buy my own membership to then go to the gym that I have paid to support.”</p> <p>“you are automatically opted in to be paying all these fines and fees and I remember having a conversation with somebody in, I guess, Student Connect or whatever, Students</p>

	<p>Association attempting to opt out of all of those kind of things”</p> <p>“improving the financial circumstances for students would be to make it more clear on what [they are] paying for, like explanations of what that is, and then options to just not pay for it because like if you're not going to go to the gym here and ever why would you pay for the gym”</p> <p>“after paying tuition, I don't have money to get textbooks”</p> <p>“when I'm registering I see I believe there's a symbol, when you register for no textbook cost. I am more inclined to register for that class because I know that that will alleviate some financial strain going forward”</p> <p>“whenever I take a class with a free textbook it allows me to spend that money elsewhere”</p>
<p><b>Residence and Parking</b></p> <p>Living expenses weight heavily on students and can negatively effect their well-being and student success</p>	<p>“[living] on tight budgets”</p> <p>“the stress from the budget and worrying about food and shelter [has impacted their] overall mental well-being.”</p> <p>“[their] rent just went up and [they are] considering taking less classes again or even considering dropping out to just go back to work because [they would] rather have money to live [their] life than be a student”</p> <p>“telling the residence office to hold off on payment because it's coming but it was barely enough to actually cover it”</p> <p>“[they] find it hard to live off of the government grant that is given and [they] actually started working last term in order to supplement that which means that like [their] education suffered because [they] had to change modes all the time and have a brain and school brain”</p> <p>“this year [was] the first year that [they have] had the privilege of not having to work [and that] the only reason [they were] able to do that [was] because of having support from [their] spouse.</p> <p>“[finding] it so interesting that [they] pay what [they] pay for tuition, and yet [they] still have to pay hundreds of dollars to park”</p>

	“[having] a rental and it was stressful and anxiety ridden for [them] because like, [are they] going to get a ticket now?”
<b>Amenities on Campus</b>  Students expressed having financial struggles while on campus and having difficulties paying for food and other necessities that the campus offers	“the only food I can afford here on campus is Tim Hortons. Everything is so expensive” "The pay-what-you-can program and stuff like that. Like, I know what it is, but if I were to go to the counter and be like, 'Yeah, I want that,' I wouldn't know. That process intimidates me." "the pay what you can, I'm like, okay, I'm poor. But I have 20 bucks, so what do you want from me? And I would never do something like that because it's kind of open-ended."

## Appendix A

Sign- Up Sheet:



I, \_\_\_\_\_, the \_\_\_\_\_ (e.g.,  
Research Assistant) am helping with (e.g., Focus Groups, transcribing) \_\_\_\_\_

**I agree to -**

- Keep all the information shared with me confidential by not discussing or sharing the research information in any form or format (e.g., focus groups, transcripts, themes) with anyone other than the research team.
- Keep all research information in any form or format (e.g., recordings, transcripts, files, documents) secure while it is in my possession.
- Return all research information in any form or format (e.g., recordings, transcripts, files, documents) to the research team when I have completed the research tasks.
- After consulting with the research team, erase or destroy all research information in any form or format regarding this research project that is not returnable to the research team (e.g., information stored on computer hard drive).
- Keep names and stories of participants confidential by not discussing or sharing information outside of the research team if the participants are to share this information.
- Inform the principal investigators (Dr. Anomi Bearden or Dr. Jamie Prowse Turner), of any challenges, concerns, or difficulties faced with which further assistance or support is needed.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Appendix C

**Informed Consent Sheet**



## Informing Campus Mental Health Strategy Through Student Perspectives

Principle Investigators: Dr. Anomi Bearden and Dr. Jamie Prowse Turner

Co-researchers: Star Clynes, Amalia Uliniuc, Tanya Lyons-Belt, Dr. Krista Robson

Sponsor: Kristine Plastow

Funder: Post-Secondary Student Mental Health Grant, RIIPEN Grant

### **Purpose of the Study**

This research project aims to supplement the Canadian Campus Well-being (CCWS) Survey and assist in revising Red Deer Polytechnic's Student Mental Health Strategy from 2024-2027. The focus groups will help to inform campus mental health strategy through collecting perspectives from students. Some topics of discussion include: what RDP is doing well to support student well-being? what challenges are students facing that impact their academic success and/or well-being? What can be done to improve student services/supports? and how the institution can foster campus connections and social support to reinforce sense of belonging?

### **Introduction**

You are being invited to participate in a focus group discussion on how Red Deer Polytechnic can better support student mental health and well-being. You will be asked six questions. You will have time to share your point of view, experience, or opinion on each. At any point you may stop the focus group facilitator and ask for clarification. With your permission, our conversation will be recorded to ensure accuracy in the final report.

The data collected during these focus groups will be used for a final project, by co-researchers Star Clynes and Amalia Uliniuc and may be presented at conferences and/or published in an academic journal. Any sample quotes used will not have any participant information connected to them. In other words, nothing you share will be traced back to you and you will not be identified in any way, your identity will remain completely confidential. Your identity as well as any information shared will also remain confidential by any member of the research team. Additionally, all research participants will be expected to keep the details of the discussion confidential. This group conversation will take about 45-60 minutes. You may experience some benefits from sharing your opinion, such as learning about other student experiences and what student services Red Deer Polytechnic has to offer. By signing, you also agree to keep other participants' identities and responses confidential.

For your time and valuable contribution, you will receive a \$5.00 Tim Horton's gift card and be entered to win a well-being basket of \$50.00 value. Your participation in these conversations is completely voluntary, and you have the right to say no or to pass on any questions you choose to. If at any time you would not like to continue, you will still receive the

gift card, and your name will still be entered in the draw. A skill testing question may be required when collecting the gift basket.

If at any point you decide to withdrawal your participation from the focus group discussions, please contact Dr. Anomi Bearden, Dr. Jamie Prowse-Turner, Star Clynes, or Amalia Uliniuc before March 30, 2023. There will be a contact sheet provided to you.

## Appendix D

**Demographics sheet:**

What Program are you in: \_\_\_\_\_

(Please Print)

Year of Study:

- ☐ First year
- ☐ Second Year
- ☐ Third Year
- ☐ Fourth Year
- ☐ Fifth Year
- ☐ Prefer not to say
- ☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_

Age:

- ☐ 18-29
- ☐ 30-49
- ☐ 50+
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Gender Identity:

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Non-Binary
- ☐ Two-Spirit
- ☐ Transgender
- ☐ Prefer not to say
- ☐ Other \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_

(Please Print)

Do you have any children or dependents:

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Do you identify with/as any of the following:

- ☐ International Student
- ☐ LGBTQ2IAS+

☐ Indigenous, Metis, or Inuit

☐ Newcomer

☐ None of the above

☐ Prefer not to say

Other \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix E

### Verbal Consent Script: Focus Groups

My name is \_\_\_\_, and I would like to thank you for volunteering your time to participate today.

### Consent to Record Interview

If you agree to participate, I will ask you six questions. You will have time to share your point of view, experience, or opinion on each. At any point you may stop me and ask me to explain if you don't understand the question. With your permission, our conversation will be recorded to make sure we get your point of view in your own words. We are working with Dr. Anomi Bearden (Psychology Instructor), Dr. Jamie Prowse Turner (Psychology Instructor), Tanya Lyons-Belt, counselling services manager, and Dr. Krista Robson (Sociology Instructor), and we hope that these conversations will help us understand student views and needs on how Red Deer Polytechnic can better assist students with mental health, well-being, connection, and belongingness on campus. Learning about the experiences and needs of students can help to inform mental health strategy within the institution.

Your opinions will help two RDP 4<sup>th</sup> year Psychology students who will submit the information as part of their final report in an independent research course. This information will likely be presented at conferences and may be submitted for publication. We might use sample quotes, but these quotes will not have any participant information connected to them. Your identity as well as any information shared will also remain confidential by any member of the research team.

This group conversation will take about 45-60 minutes. You may experience some benefits from sharing your opinion, such as learning about other student experiences and what services Red Deer Polytechnic has to offer. For your time and contribution, you will receive a \$5.00 Tim Horton's gift card and be entered to win a wellbeing basket, of \$50.00 value. Your participation in these conversations is completely voluntary, and you have the right to say no. If at any time you would not like to continue to participate, please let me know, you will still receive the gift card, and your name will be entered into the draw.

Some of the questions may be difficult or uncomfortable to answer. Feel free to skip any questions you prefer not to answer (simply say "skip" or "pass"). Share only as much or as little as you wish. It is possible that some of the people in the group could know one another or could feel uncomfortable sharing their perspectives in groups. We ask that you respect one another's opinions and do not share anything you have heard within these conversations with anyone outside of this group. If at any point you do feel uncomfortable, we will be providing a contact sheet to connect you with any supports you may need. These contacts include the Principal Investigators: Dr. Anomi Bearden and Dr. Jamie Prowse Turner, or Co- researchers: Star Clynes, and Amalia Uliniuc, The Red Deer Polytechnic Research Ethics Board, the Red Deer Polytechnic Counselling Services, and 2-1-1 (to access various community supports).

All information collected will be locked in a filing cabinet or stored on a password protected computer in the Principal Researcher's locked office. The recordings or transcripts (with no names or identifying information) may be heard or read only by select members of the research team. The recordings will be kept secure for 5 years, following this time they will be deleted/destroyed. If you have any questions, about the process, please feel free to ask.

**Consent to quote from interview**

In presentations and reports the researchers may use some sample quotes to highlight important information and opinions shared. No personal or identifying information will be shared. In other words, your name or identity will not be connected to any sample quotes that we use, you will be kept anonymous.

Before I proceed with asking you any questions:

Do you agree/give permission to participate in this conversation?

Do you agree/give permission to the recording of this interview?

Do you agree to keep everything that is shared within this focus group confidential?

Do you give permission to be quoted without any identifying information within the researcher's final report?

## Appendix F

### **For focus groups, we will be booking rooms for the following times:**

Note: During focus groups, Dr. Anomi Bearden, Dr. Jamie Prowse Turner, and Tanya Lyons-Belt will be available in case student researchers need additional support or have unanticipated challenges arise.

- 1) Tuesday Jan 23, 10:30 – 11:30 am
- 2) Wednesday Jan 24, 4:00 - 5:00 pm
- 3) Friday Jan 26, 11:30 - 12:30
- 4) Monday Jan 29, 11:00 am – 12:00 pm
- 5) Wednesday Jan 31, 4:00 - 5:00 pm
- 6) Thursday Feb 1, 11:00 am – 12:00 pm
- 7) Friday Feb 2, 11:30 - 12:30
- 8) Monday Feb 5, 11:00 am – 12:00 pm
- 9) Thursday Feb 8, 4:00 - 5:00 pm
- 10) Friday Feb 9, 11:30 - 12:30
- 11) Monday Feb 12, 11:00 am – 12:00 pm
- 12) Tuesday Feb 13, 4:00 - 5:00 pm

## Appendix G

### **Debriefing Script:**

#### *Post-Secondary Barriers, Belongingness, and Well-Being: Informing Campus Mental Health Strategy Through Student Perspectives*

Thank you for your participation in the focus group discussions on what Red Deer Polytechnic can do to better support student mental health and well-being. Learning about the experiences and needs of students can show us what the strengths, gaps, and opportunities for growth are within our institution.

A 4<sup>th</sup> year student from Red Deer Polytechnic started this project as part of their course. We hope that you also have experienced some benefits from sharing your opinion and learning from other people's experiences.

We understand that some of the questions that we asked may have been uncomfortable for you. If you have experienced this, we apologize for any discomfort and we will connect you with further support services.

This information will likely be presented at conferences and may be submitted for publication. Additionally, this information will be shared with Counselling Services Manager, Tanya Lyons-Belt, to ensure that your feedback is taken into consideration when forming the 2024-2027 Mental Health Strategy. We might use sample quotes, but these quotes will not have any participant information connected to them. Your identity will remain completely confidential within the Research team.

Again, your participation is completely voluntary, that's why you may still choose to stop at this point. If you chose to do so, we will delete the information you have shared/ given to us. If



you decide to stop participating at this point, there won't be any negative consequences, you will still receive the gift card for your time and will still be entered into the well-being basket draw.

Are you still comfortable with me using your answers in this project? Do you have any questions at this point that we may be able to answer? If you have any further questions about your participation, please feel free to email the researchers, Dr. Anomi Bearden, Dr. Jamie Prowse Turner, Star Clynes, or Amalia Uliniuc.

Again, we would like to thank you for your time, and we hope you found this to be an enjoyable and/or rewarding experience. If you have any questions, comments, or would like to access support services at Red Deer Polytechnic, please check the contact information sheet we have given you.

Here is a \$5.00 Tim Horton's gift card as a thank you for your time and valuable contribution. We will now enter your name into the draw for a well-being basket as well. You will be contacted by e-mail if you are one of the lucky winners.

## Appendix H

**Participant Consent Sheet**

*Post-Secondary Barriers, Belongingness, and Well-Being: Informing Campus Mental  
Health Strategy Through Student Perspectives*

**As a participant, do you agree to the following?**

- Do you agree/give permission to the recording of this focus group?
- Do you agree to keep everything that is shared within this focus group confidential?
- Do you give permission to be quoted without any identifying information within the researcher's final report?

If you agree, please sign below:

---

Print Name

Signature

Date

Appendix I

### **Contact Sheet for Participants**

Post-Secondary Barriers, Belongingness, and Well-Being: Informing Campus Mental Health  
Strategy Through Student Perspectives

If you have any questions about your participation, you may contact:

Principal Investigators:

Dr. Anomi Bearden

Phone: 403-356-4857

Email: [Anomi.Bearden@rdpolytech.ca](mailto:Anomi.Bearden@rdpolytech.ca)

Dr. Jamie Prowse Turner

Email: [Jamie.Prowse-Turner@rdpolytech.ca](mailto:Jamie.Prowse-Turner@rdpolytech.ca)

Co- Researchers

Star Clynes

Email: [Star.Clynes@rdpolytech.ca](mailto:Star.Clynes@rdpolytech.ca)

Amalia.Uliniuc

Email: [Amalia.Uliniuc@rdpolytech.ca](mailto:Amalia.Uliniuc@rdpolytech.ca)

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a participant, you may contact the Red Deer  
Polytechnic Research Ethics Board:

Phone: 403- 343- 4066

Email: [ethics@rdpolytech.ca](mailto:ethics@rdpolytech.ca)

Collaborative Partners and Supports:

Dr. Krista Robson

Email: [krista.robson@rdpolytech.ca](mailto:krista.robson@rdpolytech.ca)

Tanya Lyons-Belt

Email: [tanya.lyons-belt@rdpolytech.ca](mailto:tanya.lyons-belt@rdpolytech.ca)

Phone: (403) 342-3338

RDP Counselling Centre

Email: [Counselling@rdpolytech.ca](mailto:Counselling@rdpolytech.ca)

Phone: (403) 343-4064

Dial 2-1-1 to contact an Information & Referral Specialist